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WHAT OF *AMERICAN* ART?

by Robert Aitken

CONCERNING Art, Art with a capital, ancient or modern, I am as innocent as was Elisha's head of hair. But do not therefore cry "Go to, baldhead!" for that were unoriginal, a plagiarism; and it is against just such weaknesses among the brethren of the brush in this country that I, a humble "artist and colorman in words,"—a borrower myself, you see, but in broad daylight and quotation marks—that I am forcibly impelled to raise my feeble voice in protest.

Let me speak first, and listen patiently. A little later you shall show me how to write sense instead of nonsense. So we may help each other as good comrades should: for comradeship does not consist in indiscriminate encomium. Let me point out a weak spot that I, with my Philistine eyes, see in contemporaneous American art; taking for granted all the progress it has made—is making—and remembering that the exception proves the rule.

Here we have a New World about us; not island, country, continent, but World. Whence we have gone, are going forth to learn all that the Old can teach concerning art. But—and the crux of my argument lies in the question—what of *American* art? Not plagiarisms, copies, replicas, such as we bring in bundles every fall from Rome or Paris, London or Madrid, not the art of the emigrant from this our fatherland, but that which finds its source, inspiration, and fruition in our midst.

We have all dug what lore we could from the dead centuries that make the Old World what it is. Have we in that achieved the aim and object of our own brief lives, we of the New World, not the Old? Shall it suffice us that we can imitate; has the last word indeed been said as to creation?

It seems to me, in my far-reaching ignorance, that we are quite too busy looking backwards, not to say bankwards, in an age of groveling before the Golden Calf, to have time for the laying well and truly, as we ought, of the foundations of that great School of the New World to which our posterity will one day turn for their immortals.

Giovanni Cimabue and Jan Van Eyck had never heard of the New World, for Christopher Columbus lived in Sandro Botticelli's times; but they three were Old Masters at the time Walter Raleigh landed with his immigrants at Roanoke. How have we fared since then, towards a temple of our own? What of our own brief day and generation? Who will be the Old Masters of this wonderful New World when there is an Art Students' League in Saturn, a Metropolitan Museum in the Moon, and planets send their young men to the United States, which will be all old, and grey, and timeworn then, to seek the springs of knowledge?

To-day is ours, tomorrow our descendants'; who will look back to us, as we to other nations, for a due legacy of lasting life-work. Have we among us those who, when that time comes, will fill for them the niches filled for us by figures foreign? Or shall we show them our imported treasures, tell them how wise it were to foster native art by tariff, and so refer them to the fetiches of Europe, bidding them bow down there, and to eschew vain effort to break loose from the bonds of our soul-killing tradition that there is nothing new under the sun, or moon, or stars.

Where is the strong man who will stand, alone if need be, even as Columbus did, in the assurance that there *must be* a New World in art; and whose name will go down the ages as the original Old Master of America? I hear it whispered that a prophet may lack honor in his own country; that there are checks and *kudos* for the fortunate on alien shores, riches and reputation to be won abroad by Art American! Can it indeed be that we are so poor in purse and spirit? Is art impossible to us save and except we are acclaimed among

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our fellows? Is it synonymous with the word dollars? Are we to build for the future among the wily Old Masters of Wall Street? I trow not, brethren.

Our Uncle Sam is lavish with the candy and molasses among visitors; he has a genial habit of extending the glad hand to strangers, letting his own folk wander far afield and settle where they will; but in the snuggest corner of his great big heart there is an almost empty place that we may step right into if we will. It isn't reachable down Easy Street, nor yet by means of a fat bank book and a motor car. Material success is no corollary of moral worth, and those for whom it's waiting are the strugglers who have fallen or those who have won through in the attempt to set four-square the corner stones of the American art we are going to be so proud of some day soon.

Don't be discouraged though Uncle Sam scan you with indifferent, calculating eyes. He is at present a commercial man and quite undemonstrative among his own family, but none the less he has his feelings. Remember that there's room for you as well as for the visitors, and, after you have had your fling abroad, come back, show him what you have gathered in your Wanderjahre, settle to serious work in the home-lot.

"Work for the work's sake." Give us American art, bound by no by-laws of the past, according to the light that there is in you. Strike off the shackles of a cramped conventionality, show yourselves individuals not sheep, the leaders that you ought to be, not followers, as we, most of us—and worse luck!—are.

Do not desert us for the flesh-pots! Plain living and high thinking have been proven quite compatible. And do not worry about your reward. That will most surely come, if you are seeking the True Grail. *Ars longa, vita brevis!*

What's that you say? A more artistic atmosphere abroad! Young sir! An Artist cannot but irradiate atmosphere. If he unduly craves an artificial stimulus in that respect methinks that the root of the matter is not in him. If baggy trousers and sabots, or a plug hat and highlows, represent art to your mind, get you gone to the grey gaieties of the *Quatz' Arts* or Covent Garden; you never will be missed in our great gallery of Art American.

The which will not depend on atmosphere of that sort, but will be built upon the flesh and blood and travail of such men as have the vision to see Here, and not Elsewhere, the altar upon which the sacrifice of every true artist's life is and will be most acceptable.

Art and Education

Several years ago a young woman called upon a prominent painter in New York City and asked his terms for "a dozen lessons in painting."

"Well," said he, "have you had any experience in painting?—have you ever studied it heretofore?"

"No."

"Have you studied drawing—or have you devoted any time to drawing?"

"No."

"Well, it would be perfectly absurd for you to undertake to learn to paint without some preliminary knowledge of drawing——"

"But I do not want to paint," said the would-be student. "I have no idea of becoming an artist; I only want to learn enough so I can teach!"

Academy Notes.

Art and Business

Collector—I see that you have pictures by Titian, Rubens and Velasquez; have you a Michael Angelo?

Dealer—No sir; but I can get you one next week, and if you will decide upon the size, you can order the frame now.

Exchange.